

Discovering Darlington Hippodrome

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The history of the Hippodrome

Plans for a Hippodrome Theatre were drawn up in 1904 by a group of local businessmen known as the Darlington Hippodrome Company. However, it took over two years to agree on a design that involved three different architects submitting a series of designs.

The siting of this new theatre was a business decision. Bank Top Station (the main station today) had recently been enlarged, and the road from it into town, called Parkgate, became a major route. When Parkgate was widened in 1900, it opened up land for new development. This was an ideal site for a new theatre. It was close to the

town centre, near to the railway station and would soon be served by a planned tram service. It was also anticipated that the theatre's proximity to the station would encourage people from surrounding villages and towns to use the expanding rail service to come to the theatre.

The theatre was also deliberately planned next to a new fire station. Many theatres had been destroyed by fire owing to their timber interiors and use of candlelight, oil or gaslight. Although the Hippodrome would be lit by electricity there would still be a risk of fire, especially through acts that involved fire and pyrotechnics or by a carelessly discarded match, cigar or cigarette by members of the audience.

Once the final design was approved, it took less than a year to build the Hippodrome and it opened on 2nd September 1907 as "The New Hippodrome and Palace of Varieties", though it would often be fondly referred to as the "Hip".

The theatre's weekly acts always arrived on Sunday, on the same train which brought the weekly supplies of fish from Grimsby and Hull. Locals soon called this service, "Of fish 'n' actors". From the station the performers would proceed downhill with all their paraphernalia, props, performing animals and sets to the theatre and lodgings close by.

Like most theatres at the time, there were different entrances, toilets, bars and circulating areas for different classes. This ensured that the well-off people needn't come into contact with working classes. Comfortable seating was provided in the stalls and grand circle, but the pit and the gallery comprised long rows of wooden benches. There were also two boxes at



the very front, which faced inwards so its wealthy occupants in all their finery and jewellery could be seen by everyone in the audience.

Signor Pepi, whether through benevolence or business acumen, allowed the Hippodrome to be used for charity events and, later, as the home for the locally-acclaimed Darlington Operatic Society.

It was this Society, after over three decades of low audience numbers at the theatre, financial uncertainty and temporary closures, which presented an ambitious and unusual rescue package to Darlington Council. The Council eventually bought it and renamed it the Darlington Civic in 1966.

A succession of creative managers, through vision, graft and ingenious marketing, have re-engaged local people and elevated the Civic to an eminent regional theatre.

After its multi-million pound restoration over 2016/17, part-funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the theatre emerged once more as the Hippodrome. Along with its theatrical partner, Theatre Hullabaloo, in the adjacent redundant fire station converted with Arts Council funding, Darlington now offers schools unparalleled theatrical opportunities.